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Imagery and form: Re-defining Ethiopian Christian-Orthodox culture

by

Hiriti Asmelash Beyene

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

Major: Art and Design (Craft Design)

Program of Study Committee:

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Ames, Iowa

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Graduate College
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This is to certify that the master's thesis of

Hiriti Asmelash Beyene

has met the thesis requirements of Iowa State University

Signatures have been redacted for privacy

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INTRODUCTION

The goal of this thesis was two fold: to create a new space of artistic expression and to bring forth traditional Ethiopian Orthodox imagery to the Western mode of textile art.

In the Fall of 2001, I traveled to Ethiopia to conduct a study on hand woven textiles. My inquiry was impelled by the lack of Ethiopian fashions as well as textiles in Western markets. My assumption was that the textile motifs and designs used originated from the Christian-Orthodox culture of Ethiopia. Thus began my journey to find the history behind the images and ended with a discovery of ideas and techniques that have helped to define my work as a fiber artist.

In the five months I stayed in the country, I was able to utilize the Ethiopian Institute of Cultural Studies resources, to interview experts in various fields on textiles and other related subjects and was also able to travel to historic Christian monasteries and churches built between the 11th and 16th centuries. Therefore, this thesis follows the travels, discoveries and inspirations that led to the creation and presentation of four art-to-wear pieces for a Master of Arts degree.

ARTIST'S STATEMENT

In my work, I seek to bridge the gap between my interests in fashion, textiles, art and the differences between Ethiopian and Western (mainly U.S.) cultures. I also seek to answer personal questions about my identity as an Ethiopian, an African, a black person, a woman, as “the self” and finally, as an artist.

I was able to find a middle ground for these concerns when I chose to use the traditional Ethiopian cape as an art-to-wear form for expression. I was able to integrate Ethiopian Christian-Orthodox motifs with personal subject matter to create three-dimensional works of art thus, changing not just the art but also the meaning of the culture itself.

By choosing to work mainly with fibers/fabrics and through utilizing the spinning, stitching, knotting, braiding, dyeing, painting and molding techniques, I was able to create a visual surface which is the perfect canvas for portraying my “visual” voice.

CHAPTER 1

SOURCES OF IMAGERY AND INFLUENCES

Form

The main challenge I faced was trying to discover an art form that could successfully integrate my interests in art and fashion. I needed a “canvas” on which I could successfully create an art surface in the form of art-to-wear that was large enough to display imagery and strong enough to portray a protective as well as an emotional feel. For inspiration, I turned to the American fiber artists Nick Cave, Tim Harding and Robert Hillestad. Their masterful technique of converting colors, imagery and raw fibers into capes, body suites and jackets helped me to narrow my focus onto the cape form and experiment with flexible natural materials. I decided to work with cotton, silk and wool. This was in keeping with the decision to utilize natural fibers commonly used in Ethiopia and to discover ways for changing their integral structure. I felt that if I was able to transform the chosen religious imagery into wearable fiber art retaining most of its original form, while stripping it of its religious connotation as an object of worship then, I could hopefully inspire Ethiopian cultural artists to think outside the box. I want my art to serve as an educational tool for Ethiopians on material and technique exploration as well as to help illuminate the world of Ethiopian history and creativity.

The Cape

I chose the cape primarily for the function it served as a decorative costume and a protective cover from natural elements. I felt that the form, combined with imagery, had the potential for carrying double meaning beyond functional wear. For example, in the art piece *Temptations of the Mind*, the imagery deals with human struggle between good and evil. A

body which dons the cape becomes part of the conflict but by removing the cape, the body becomes free thus containing the meaning of imagery on the garment itself. However, whoever wears it next will go through the same drama until they remove the cape thus symbolizing that *temptation* is a human emotion and all problems are temporary. It is like healing art.

I also chose the cape for its universally recognizable design and its importance in Ethiopian history of costume. In Ethiopian history, royalty, court members and priests were allowed to wear capes. It was a sign of status due to the novelty of the shape and the richness of the materials used like velvet and silk. Costume was used to differentiate between people of power and the low class. (Pankhurst, 25) Besides the imported silk and velvets, wool capes were widely used by the lords. The clergy also had a hierarchy in richness of material worn according to rank but the cape remained a staple costume for all. Today, capes are used in Orthodox religious ceremonies by the clergy and as wedding costumes for newlyweds.

(Fig 1)

Imagery

...the art of Ethiopia remains uniquely different from that of any other African art form, because Ethiopian artists expressed themselves exclusively through painting, while sculpture was the primary medium of creative expression of the people of Western, Central and Southern Africa. (Chojnacki, 19)

For this thesis, I applied the information I had collected on a research trip to Ethiopia where I spent five months exploring Orthodox art. The relevant inspiration for the capes I have created are mainly derived from a 14th - 16th century church wall painting in central Ethiopia and panel paintings found in the archives of Institute of Ethiopian Studies and an interview with an art historian from the Addis Ababa School of Fine Arts.

Panel Paintings

I was able to gain access to the Ethiopian Institute of Cultural Studies where I utilized written sources on Ethiopian culture and observed the collection in the Addis Ababa University museum section for Christian-Orthodox art. Most of the panels were triptychs with a central panel devoted to the Virgin Mary and the side panels showing scenes from the Old and New Testaments. My interest in the panel paintings was purely for discovering decorative flat patterns to convert into sculptural art-to-wear.

Church wall paintings

I traveled to Zege Mariam, a 14th century hidden church on Zege Island in Central Ethiopia to study the wall paintings. The location of the church was strategically chosen due to non-Christian groups that threatened the survival of Orthodox culture, thus starting a tradition of building hidden places of worship inaccessible to the enemy. (Leroy, 28) To get to the island, I had to hire a boat that took an hour each way from the city of Bahir Dar.

The church which is fashioned after the African hut architecture is constructed from wood, mud and grass. Inside the center of the circular structure is a square room where its four walls are decorated with different scenes from the life of Jesus. Each square side of the interior is assigned to different groups of worshippers. One side is allocated to females, the other for men and the other part for priests and deacons. The fourth wall consists of a wooden door and is heavily decorated with angels. Only the head priests are allowed inside the door where the symbolic Ark of Covenant is believed to reside. (Leroy, 29) I was specifically interested on the decorative wall paintings and spent several days photographing the walls.

Cultural Motif

The influences of the Orthodox Church are clearly visible in today's Ethiopian culture. In the 4th century with the conversion to Christianity a law was passed that all believers had to utilize the symbol of the cross on all parts of their lives to portray their allegiance. (Korabiewicz) Crosses were tattooed on peoples' bodies, embroidered on their clothing and painted on everyday objects like pots and pans. Today, the legacy still remains except that the religious meaning behind the cross has changed to mere décor for jewelry, as embroidered and woven design on dresses and shawls and is also used for household decorations. Therefore, I based one of the cape designs after this principle in order to document the effect of Christian-Orthodox art on modern day Ethiopian visual culture.

Color

The color inspirations for the works come from the information I gathered from an interview with Mr. Girma Tiruneh, an Art historian from Addis Ababa School of Fine Arts, on the doctrine of Christian art, as well as from observations of the bold colors used for hand woven baskets of East Ethiopia.

According to Mr. Girma Tiruneh, the colors used in Christian art are taken straight out of the Bible. For example:

...when Jesus is crucified, he is depicted in red, at resurrection he wears white. The Virgin Mary on the other hand wears a deep blue cloak with a red outfit. The halo is yellow and rarely light blue is used. Green and ochre are used as background colors. High intensity earth colors like green, brown and black are also employed. The main imported color was blue or indigo. For interlace designs, red, yellow, blue, black and green were used. Black was a special color used for outlines, hair, calligraphy as well as for depicting evil and to differentiate slaves from masters. However, in some paintings, dark blue was used to portray evil. Red was used in honoring the martyrs, saints and lords. It was also used for depicting life and death since it is the color of blood, which is found during birth and accidental death. Bold yellow is a dominant color used as a background decoration. (Fig 2)

Green was also used in conjunction with yellow to divide ground and space as background. It is also found on costumes as a plain color or in small decorative patterns. Brown was used for showing the flesh tone of the people. However, this was dependent on the artist's style and in most paintings, a light pinkish color is used for faces. White was used for depicting animals, the traditional Ethiopian costumes, flowers and borders for displaying the title of the arts.

Shadows and values were created by using darker versions of the same color to portray folds, roundness of faces, and closed in spaces. It was more a simple attempt at rendering, which placed more importance on the meaning behind the art as symbolic interpretation of Christian teaching, than the attempt to capture perfected three-dimensional spaces and figures.

In choosing the colors, I also observed the modern mass market of Ethiopia and discovered the relation of bold clashing color usage from costumes worn to decoration used on functional items like hand woven baskets. Thus, I chose to use black and brown colors with primary and secondary hues and their shades. I tried to remain close to the visible influences of Ethiopian culture.

CHAPTER 2

ACTUALIZATION OF CONCEPTS WITHIN PROCESS

“Cross In a Box”

I first became acquainted with this design in a 15th century Christian Manuscript used as a decorative representation of the trinity. The second reference point for this image was on wall paintings in the church of Zege Marian, Zege Island-Bahir Dar. It was used as a decorative bed on which the Virgin Mary is found sitting. (Fig. 3)

The design was a series of square grids with thick borders and miniature square corners. Inside the bigger squares there are two sets of crosses that create the illusion of dimension. There is a large X whose ends rest on the corners of the square and set of single points or dashes on the center of each square side. These dashes or lines sometimes touch the mid point of the large X or they are short and hang away. (Fig. 4) The background color is always golden yellow and the outlines of the design are in red-orange. I was attracted to the color combination and the balance of the grid-crosses and wanted to experiment to see how I could bring this flat two-dimensional decorative art into a three-dimensional cape form.

The first step in transforming this design was in choosing a sturdy, malleable material. I decided on cotton due to its accessibility, flexibility and superior color absorption. I also wanted to use a material similar to the common gauze-like Ethiopian textile (*Shemma*) and the closest fabric was cheesecloth.

The second step was deciding on the length of the cape. I felt in order to closely recreate the original square grids, I needed to have a hip length cape which is closer to a square format than a floor length rectangular cape would be.

The Process

To get an accurate design of the original picture, I devised a system for inventing sturdy, strong rope-like cords.

I measured myself from shoulder to hip and cut about a yard of cloth. I laid the fabric flat and folded the length edges of the cloth inward about a $\frac{1}{2}$." Then, I took the width edges and folded them to the center on either side and repeated the process until the fabric became $\frac{1}{8}$ " of its original size. I put the width edges together and stitched creating a rope-like cord. I continued the process until I had twenty-seven length pieces and eleven widths. (Fig. 5)

To create the body of the cape, I measured around the shoulders and hips and added extra space for movement. Then I constructed an extra long horizontal cord and used it as the base for the cape. I attached two vertical cords on the edges of this cord and used them as the central front sides. I added the remaining twenty-five vertical cords and stitched their edges to the top of the horizontal base. Once I finished attaching all the cords, I assembled the unattached edges and using double thread, ran a needle through them and gathered all the pieces in order to form the neck-shoulder connection.

At this point, I had already constructed the collar after measuring the width of the neck and deciding on 2" for height by taking a single cord and molding it into a box-like structure. (Fig. 6) Inside this rectangular collar I added five vertical cords that divided the whole structure into a series of grids. I attached this collar to the gathered vertical cords thus anchoring the neck and finishing the skeleton of the cape. (Fig. 7)

The next step was to attach the nine remaining horizontal pieces. For this, I stitched each cord to the inside of the center front vertical pieces of the cape thus creating the grid with 2-3"x $1\frac{1}{2}$ - 2" boxes dependent on space on the neckline shoulder connection to the

body and hem of the cape. Finally, I added the diagonal pieces on opposite directions so as to have a “cross in a box” effect.

The diagonal bands were created by first dividing the cheesecloth fabric into two lengthwise and estimating the width by measuring the diagonal corners of the top shoulder box to the hem. Once the length was estimated, extra space was given for allowance and flat bands were constructed by folding the pre-cut fabric into $\frac{1}{4}$ ”– $\frac{1}{2}$ ” widths. I added these diagonal bands to each box corners and stitched them onto the back side of the cape in both left and right orientation. The end result was a series of X shapes in each box grid.

The last step for this cape was in adding the little “balls” or the three-dimensional looking crosses found on the original decorative design. To create these shapes, I used about 2 yards of cheesecloth and cut it into three equal parts widthwise and divided each column lengths into 2” shapes which gave me 2”x 3.5 - 4” size rectangles. I followed the same process as used for the grid cords and folded the fabric into a roll by turning in the edges. The end result was a series of curled finger shaped pieces which served as the “ball” or inner cross of the boxes. My intention at this point was to insert four “balls” at the mid point of each box for the entire cape. However, due to the small shape of the boxes and the cross design created by the diagonal shapes, there wasn’t enough space left over to have a visible design which is equivalent to the original picture. The compromise was to insert these two balls per box only at the hem and collar of the cape which is a traditional area for Ethiopian dress decoration.

Color was the last step determined after the form was completed. I decided to dye the whole cape with one of the original colors of the design which is golden yellow and let the form be the focal point instead. (Fig. 8)

Lessons learned

In this process I've learned that compromises have to be made when an artist is trying to transform a two-dimensional flat design into a three-dimensional wearable sculpture. I wanted to remain true to the decorative pattern but the material structure of the cheesecloth caused bulkiness and narrowing of space to occur thus forcing me to improvise but become more flexible and original with the cape.

“Loops and laces”

The inspiration for this design came from a decorative 15th Century *Kebran* Manuscript design as well as the wing shapes of Ethiopian angels. It was a series of tear-drop patterns created with repetitive smaller shapes inside each bubble. (Fig. 9) I became fascinated with the looping, falling nature of the curves and decided to use raw silk which would be braided and turned into individual cascading strands.

The Process

This cape was constructed in six stages where the first step involved dividing the raw fabric into individually spun and braidable pieces. I cut long single strands about 1½ to 3 yards in length according to availability of space and, laid these pieces on a tile floor and flattened them with my fingers. When the silk is flat it starts to show single strand divisions from which I took my cue to separate the long fibers into 6-9 single strands. I divided them this way because I would later braid them and a regular braid requires three strands. (Fig. 10)

In the second step, I sprayed the individual strands with water and started to roll and spin them onto my index finger working carefully to control breakage. Then, I rolled the twisted strands onto a stick and kept spraying to keep the fibers down. In this process, I also

used water resistant tables to spray the fibers down and rolled the silk onto a stick while keeping it in a bucket to control water spillage. I was able to roll all the finger spun silk yarns into several sticks and store them for step three.

Step three involved taking three equal length strands and knotting them on one end and braiding the strands into a single piece. (Fig. 11) The next step was in creating loops that resemble the decorative tear-drop original design.

In this fun process, I took the edges of the finished silk braids and held them in place while I took one side of the braid and started creating 4" length size loops. The loop was also determined by braid length. After gathering the middle of the loops together, I rolled the edges of the braids underneath the center several times and anchored the shape into a big loop. The rolled edges gave a bulky round shape which became an important aspect for the connection of the cape. (Fig. 12)

Step five involved connecting the individual loops into a full cape. For this, I stitched the center of the outer braids to each other creating a lace effect. The dilemma for me here was whether to stitch all the sides together and make it into a closed piece. I decided to leave it open for effect. I repeated the connection process in rows and columns by stitching both sides of the loops to each other. After I had considerable amounts of connected strands, I arranged them in rows where the bulky loop heads could fit snugly in the empty space created by the connected sides. Repeating this process created a body of lace-like fabric which was then able to be fitted on a body and crafted into a cape.

The final step involved color decisions and the need to coordinate the scheme with the three art-to-wear pieces and chosen principles. Based on suggestions for using subtle colors that didn't deter from the other capes, I decided to dye gold and bronze.

This process involved the dismantling of the whole cape and systematic dyeing in order to collage the loops together for a serene look. The end result was an interchange between a gold set of loops with bronze dyed braids created by immerse dyeing only in color without a fixant and drying them in the sunlight to get a nice roasted look. I was looking to get values within the colors. Here, I also add multi-colored ruffled neckline to add visual interest to the cape. (Fig. 13)

Lessons learned

Silk was one of the most challenging materials of all the capes due to the loose and fragile nature of the fibers. I encountered breathing problems and had to invent creative ways to control both breakage and inhalation. It is also one of the most texturally pleasing and colorful materials to work with. Working with silk has helped me find personal confidence in my ability to create art out of raw fiber. Anything is possible.

“Temptations of the Mind”

The inspiration for this cape is derived from several sources. I discovered the original design in the book *Ethiopian Icons* as a decorative costume in a picture of a panel painting. The design was a set of small circular swirls connected at different angles with small lines connecting to other swirls. (Fig. 14) This pattern peaked my interest due to the similarity of the design to a set of swirled balls I created in one of my personal experimental stages. I knew I would be able to take this pattern and convert it to sculptural art.

The choice of imagery came from the panel and wall painting archive I had collected. I have always been intrigued with images of Ethiopian bodiless angels but felt that their use in modern art was very limited. I wanted to explore the angel theme by playing with its religious meaning as well as its aesthetic function. (Fig. 15) In the Ethiopian paintings these

particular angels serve as protectors, decorative elements and as support for holding the throne of the Virgin Mary.

Once I had decided on the pattern and imagery, the next step was in choosing color. For this I looked to Impressionist and Post-Impressionist artists where complementary colors created the art without use of outlines. I felt that when I construct the swirls together using color for effect, the meaning of the pattern and imagery as a whole would be more effective.

The Process

Temptations of the Mind was created using the same principles employed for creating the little points or balls in *Cross-in-a-Box*. I chose cheesecloth due to its flexibility and superior dye absorption and cut the fabric into 45"x 3-4" in size. I worked with 20-40 yards of fabric at a time and once I had a pile I would take individual pieces and start to fold the length edges ½" to the inside. I then took the width edges and folded them towards the center twice until I ended up with a 1" size band. I lifted the band by the length edges and taking the left corner started to curl it towards the right until I almost reached the edge. I then rolled the length edge of the right band and tucked it inside the larger rolled side. I stitched the rolled edges together turning them into a rolled 1" ball. I repeated the process and accumulated over a 100 yards of cheesecloth thus making this the heaviest of four capes.

The cheesecloth was dyed in two methods using Procion dyes. At first the balls were constructed individually and dyed but later, raw fabric was immersion dyed. Strips of fabric pre-cut for conversion into balls were also dyed but due to fabric layering that occurred in this approach, I ended up getting varied shades of cloth. Since I was looking for consistency in color this was not a desired effect. Therefore, I kept to dyeing one whole fabric or the

finished ball shapes. The dyeing process was also dependent on need for specific colors throughout the construction process.

In constructing the form, I started by sewing both front and back sides of the balls to each other. Since this was a time consuming process, I devised a system of stitching one side first and then turning over and stitching the rest. By leaving only one side stitched, I discovered a flexible, three-dimensional textural design that transformed the structure to an interesting level. At this stage where color was an integral part of the structure, I looked to the dotted art of Georges Suerat *A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of Le Grande Jatte* and to the mosaic art of Byzantium depicting Justinian and Theodora in St. Vitale, Ravenna for further inspiration.

The figures

The imagery created with the decorative design was a set of three heads flanked with colorful wings that extend from the back to the front. The three heads are crafted after the image of religious figures used in Ethiopian Orthodox art. (Fig. 16)

The observer

The most important head is the one found in the center of the cape, the onlooker. It is representative of me as an artist or the viewer who identifies with the emotion. As described on the meaning of the cape, by adorning the cape the wearer becomes the central figure, one who observes the world intently while tempted by his/her left and right side of the brain. The idea for the pose of the figure was inspired by a photograph I had taken of an Orthodox priest and my surprise in noticing a cross shadow on his turban when I developed the film. In a serene, yet powerful pose, the priest sat down with one hand covering his mouth, while his

eyes gazed intensely, representing a person who is caught in the vast drama of life. He was an observer that seemed to have a lot to say but was unable to speak.

The eyes of the observer are created with two meanings. The black balls stand for the pupil of the eyes and each pupil is staring at the heads on its sides. The empty parts of the eyes are supposed to signify the window to the soul or the entry into the inner sanctum of one's head.

The colors chosen are in keeping with the color doctrine of Ethiopian Orthodox art where black is used as an outline for figures and for facial representation. An inter-play of warm and cool colors are used for showing values and dimension. The original idea was to remain true to the flesh-tone colors and shadows used for the faces of the headless angels. I was looking to create the moon-like effect observed in the Ethiopian Orthodox art since the 15th century. (Chojnacki, 25) However, I had to adjust my colors due to space and ineffectiveness of monochromatic color to show value and dimension. Since my goal was to display the three heads on the back of the cape, and I was patterning the cape to a medium sized person, I had to adjust the design and squeeze the image and use highly contrasting colors to give an abstracted version of the figures.

For the hands I wanted to use brown mixed with the chosen skin tone colors (pink and plum) to symbolize the true color of Ethiopian people. I wanted to comment on how Ethiopian Orthodox art, even if it is modeled after caricatured faces of the people, still used light pink flesh tones that fit in more with Western or non-black groups. This was due to two reasons. First, Ethiopian Christian Orthodox art is an imported religion from Coptic Egypt and from the Byzantine culture. Second, resembling the religious figures after lay people did

not come into effect until the late 15th century. It was considered sacrilegious to try to imitate the holy people of the Bible thus the reason for the flesh tone choice.

The good angel

The head to left of the observer is shown in a three-quarter pose as a representative of the good angel or the reasonable voice that always guides/nags us to do the right thing. This head is our conscience. In Ethiopian art a three-quarter profile can be considered an evil face if represented by itself. However, with the addition of the third head shown in profile, a clear distinction can be made between the lesser evil between the two.

For this head, I followed the same guidelines of outlining the eyes and nose with black, and using a contrasting color as shadow. However, here I used dark blue for the outline rendering of the face as well as for the eye lashes and hair. While I still followed the same principles of leaving part of the eyes as open holes, for the pupils I chose green as the color portraying jealousy. Even the good angel is jealous of the human soul. The green pupils are focused on the central head or the observer showing the connectedness of the idea. I used lilac for the flesh tone and plum for shadow. The blues gave a cooling effect as if one is encountering the rational mind, always calm and collected.

The bad or evil angel

The right head is depicted in profile which represents negativity. According to tradition, profile art represents hypocrisy because bad/evil people don't show their true selves or their full face. (Demus, 8) This head stands for the devil, the voice that always pushes us to do the wrong things.

In choosing the color, my main goal was to create cohesion between the heads. I repeated the lilac flesh tone and the plum shadow hues for the face and for the eyebrow and

eyelid, I used a lighter shade of green with darker value for hair and head outline. The green stands for deep and utter jealousy. Part of the eye remains open while the pupil is demonstrated with a deep blue which symbolizes the calculating icy gaze of evil which is always there pretending to be on the observer's side but wanting to lead it astray or destroy its sense of tranquility. The eye looks down on the observer as if whispering into its ears. At this point, I felt that the struggle by the two angels for the observers' soul needed a final tie. The answer was to add a second hand that grabs the observers' forehead thus portraying the struggle within itself. I also decided to use the cool colors like blue, blue-violet and green to balance the angel heads as well as insinuate that the hand of the observer can also belong to the good angel while the hand that grabs belongs to the bad angel, thus creating a struggle within oneself (the observer) and the angels. I also wanted the imagery to be strong enough that if one head was taken out, the others could carry meaning on their own.

The Background

At this stage, I felt that the heads had to be displayed against a strong background that clearly emphasized the imagery. For this reason, I chose yellow as the appropriate contrast for offsetting and dividing the heads. However, I was faced with a large yellow space that needed a strong color combination to tie the ideas together. The answer was in the wing designs.

The construction of the background was done in two stages. I first attached the yellow balls to the back where the imagery is found and individually constructed a pair of yokes and dyed them as a group. I then stitched the front pieces to the back which in itself created the shoulder curve and molded a body form snugly. (Fig. 17)

The Wings

I divided the wing structure into three parts: the front wings, the back wings and the final long wings. The principles I followed here were in putting the eyes into the wings and repeating several layers of small wing patterns to be finished with the final long tip. I also wanted to have a consistent color scheme on all sides of the capes.

In constructing the wings, I followed two rules. The first was, since the yellow background that off-sets the imagery on the back and the shoulder line for the front sides was a dominant color, I paid attention to the color scheme of the central wing design for balance. Using alternating yellow, yellow-green and red contrasting eye colors in the individual wings (in Ethiopian painting, angels had white dots in the center of their wings which signified their many eyes that watch and protect), I was able to pull the yellow without offending the eyes. The second rule observed was, with the imagery being found on the back of the cape and the only designs for the front sides being wings, I decided to use contrasting color schemes for the two sides of the cape. I wanted viewers to observe the eclectic color and pattern of the front wings and get surprised when they see the calmer, less patterned design on the back. Therefore, keeping in mind the need for color balance and a shock effect, I composed the wings with similar but alternating color schemes. I also used varying lengths for the wing tips and narrowed the shapes for both the front and back sides of the cape. I left open holes on the wings to reflect the “windows to the soul” idea found on the eyes of the three heads.

(Fig. 18)

“Patches of culture”

The inspiration for this design comes from a 15th century panel painting from the archives of the Ethiopian Institute of Cultural Studies. This decorative design was created to adorn

the robe of a saint. (Fig. 19) After the success of the mosaic technique described in *Temptations of the Mind*, this rectangular design challenged my artistic curiosity. The material I chose to work with was wool because it met the list of commonly used fibers of Ethiopia which I wished to explore and transform. I had also experimented with wool in a class project where I used chicken wire with ½” squares and pulled the fiber through the openings. I discovered that wool was a flexible and easily moldable material for it retained the shape of the mesh. This was the inspiration I needed behind forming the structure of the design for this cape.

The second inspiration came from my interests in documenting the legacy of Christian-Orthodox art in modern day Ethiopia. The common icons were the angel heads and various versions of cross designs used on all aspects of life from clothing to jewelry and home décor. However, my interest for this cape was the cross, a design that had surrounded my growing years.

...to the people of Ethiopia, the production of crosses is a part of their religious life, expressing in practical and beautiful form their adoration of God. (Korabiewicz)

For my research I chose to use a simple four-sided flower-like design which was created after the symbolism of a cross rather than the finding of the exact design itself. This cross is created from grouping four black sets of wool in vertical and horizontal orientations to create a rectangular hole in-between. I placed a bold pink in the center thus receiving the contrast I desired. The arrangement of colors and the need for balance was a greater influence in the shaping of the image.

The main inspiration for the colors were the hand woven baskets of East Ethiopia. The people that are known for basket artistry are the women of Harar from the historically walled

Muslim city near the border of Somalia. People of Harar have maintained a unique culture undisturbed by the dominant Orthodox rule. Their work is recognized by the great use of colors like yellow, red, violet, blue and green in a clashing set of zig zag patterns. The clash and boldness of colors I felt fit in with the color scheme I've borrowed from the Orthodox paintings. (Fig. 20)

The Process

I bought a roll of black plastic mesh with $\frac{1}{2}$ " square openings and three pounds of raw wool. I divided the wool into four pieces and dyed them gold, black, hot pink, yellow-green and yellow-orange. I then cut the mesh into $2\frac{1}{2}$ "x $3\frac{1}{2}$ " rectangles with smooth edges. At this point, I took the wool piles and cut them to the size of the mesh rectangles with $\frac{1}{2}$ " extra space. I then proceeded to flatten the wool into a rectangle and pulled the fibers through the individual mesh squares creating a miniature grid set. I proceeded with this technique until all the wool was finished. I left the wool in the compressed position for several days after which I carefully removed the mesh. The result was a series of protruding bubble like squares with straight line ridges in between. (Fig. 21)

The main goal behind the rectangular wool was to try to closely emulate the original design. To create the irregularity of the patterns, I decided to lay the wool in alternating rows of rectangles oriented in a set of vertical and horizontal connections. By using the bold colors against black and occasional pink offsets, I was able to finish the design with a cross-like pattern that emerged, thus determining the imagery and symbolism of the cape.

The layout of the fabric was not constructed to a cape form. It was arranged in a large rectangular fabric, from which the cape was to be patterned. This created a need for choice of imagery and the flower or cross design created by the repetitive black against yellow-

greens and pink became the focal point. The cross thus became the center back of the cape and the soft golden and yellow-orange colors became the front designs. (Fig. 22)

In constructing the patterns of the rectangles as well as the cape pattern, I ran into some problems. First, when I took the wool out of the mesh, I noticed the fragility of the structure in terms of tearing and sagging. This was due to the use of uneven wool thickness when cutting the fibers for the purpose of fitting them into the mesh squares. This created the need for individually stitching the rectangular textured wool after remolding it into the mesh by immersing it into a hot water and liquid soap mixture which helps retain the desired shape. After regaining the texture and finishing the pieces into a whole rectangle, I added black felt as a background fabric and by leaving extra space for the edges, I stitched the felt onto the wool as a frame. This looked like a flat wall piece. I then took this rectangular bordered shape and draped it onto a body form like a shawl while aligning the bottom center front corners. To secure the shawl/cape design, I took two pink original wool pieces and added black felt backing and created a border finish. I measured and added these individual pieces onto the chest and stitched one side to the big rectangular cape and added snap on buttons on the other side thus creating a chest band closure. This created a cape design that is consistent with Ethiopian cape styles and was also found on Zege Mariam church wall paintings. (Fig. 23)

Lessons learned

Wool felt is a delicate material which needs careful handling. Working with a thicker wool makes life easier and the material more interesting otherwise an unnecessary amount of time will be spent binding the tearing pieces. It is easily manipulated especially if hot water and soap mixture is used. It can be re-shaped, thus opening up possibilities for creating art.

Depending on the bravery of the artist, shaping and shrinking is another possibility for working with wool. Besides the tearing and sagging problems, I have found wool to be the most moldable, rich in color and pleasing material to work with. I know this is going to be a future material for my work.

SUMMARY

The goal of this thesis was to create a new space of artistic expression and to bring forth traditional Ethiopian Orthodox imagery to the Western mode of textile art. The four capes managed to blend ancient Ethiopian artistic and religious practices with modern fabric techniques using modern dyes and materials. Artistically, the four projects allowed me to expand my creative potential by learning how to control raw materials and changing their integral structure to transform them into finished pieces of wearable art. Also, by stripping the decorative designs of their religious connotation, I was able to explore, extend and expand the meaning and culture of use.

I remain convinced that despite the rare adaptation of Ethiopian art in the west, the possibility of marking a space in modern, western textile tradition remains vast. The intensity of the colors, the richness of the textiles, and the abundance of designs leave open the door for creativity.

I hope my work inspires other Ethiopians to expand into fiber art and to push the material structures of the commonly utilized textiles beyond the traditional standards. I've only begun to test the waters. The creativity that can be achieved with these materials are endless. This is only the beginning.

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INSPIRATIONS



Figure 1. Ethiopian Costumes



Figure 2. St. George at Zege Mariam Church, Zege Island wall painting



Figure 3. Virgin and Child,
Zege Mariam Church, Zege Island



Figure 4. The washing of feet
(Kebran Manuscript)

Cross-in-a-Box

Figure 5. The cord



Figure 6. The collar band

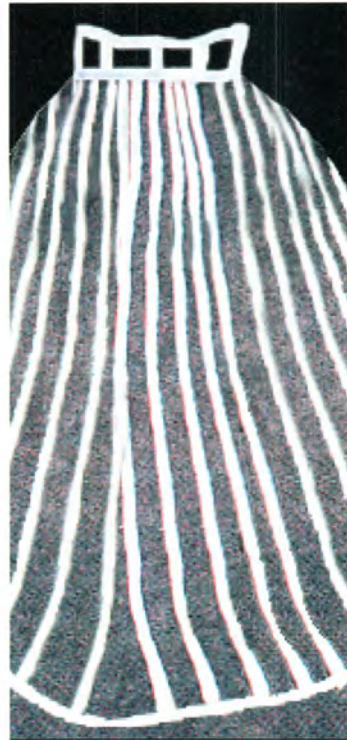
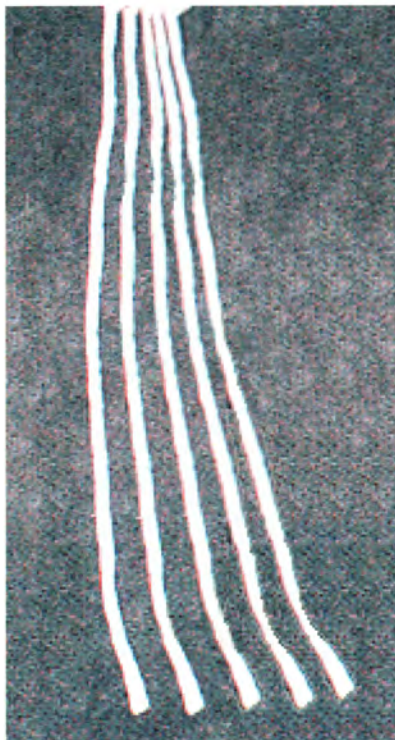


Figure 7. Constructing the skeleton of cape

Cross-in-a-Box

Figure 8. Front and back view of cape

Loops and laces

Figure 9. Sketch documenting the original inspiration



Figure 10. Dividing the silk fiber



Figure 11. Braiding Silk



Figure 12. Braided and looped silk

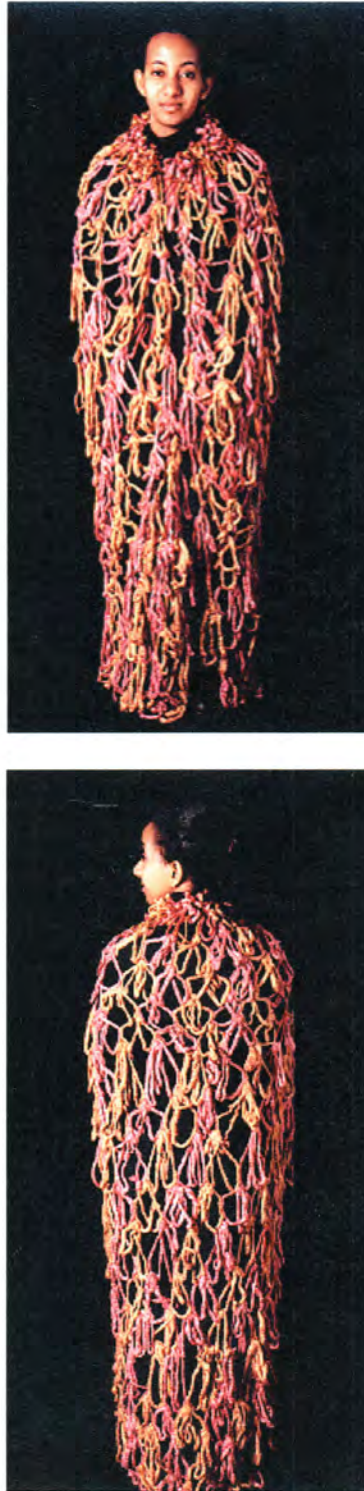
Loops and laces

Figure 13. Front and back view of cape

Temptations of the Mind



Figure 14. Virgin and Child, (Ethiopian Icons)



Figure 15. Angel heads at Zege Mariam, Zege Island

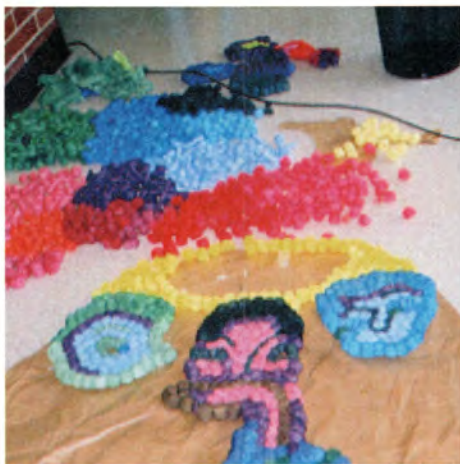


Figure 16. Creating the three heads



Figure 17. Creating the background

Temptations of the Mind



Figure 18. Front and back view of cape

Patches of Culture



Figure 19. St. Paul, unknown saint, St. Peter (Ethiopian Icons)



Figure 20. Basket tables



Figure 21. Setting the shape



Figure 22. Wool backed with felt

Patches of Culture



Figure 23. Front and back view of cape